

## Jean Lave, Changing Practice, 2011

CU note:

The ISCAR ([International Society for Cultural and Activity Research](#)) is, broadly, a group of followers of the Soviet pioneers Vygotsky, Leont'ev and Luria, of which Vygotsky is the most famous and the most fashionable. The field is referred to as "Activity Theory". It involves philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, educationalists, political scientists and others, but the common ground where all these overlap is pedagogical theory, normally taken as the theory of teaching and learning. In view of what Jean Lave has written, we might rather simply say: theory of learning.

The Activity Theorists have a publication called "[Mind, Culture, and Activity](#)", and they hold congresses, such as the one in Rome in 2011, from which Jean Lave's writing, below, is a (here considerably redacted) part. The full document is a summary of the conference. It can be viewed or downloaded in PDF from <http://lchc.ucsd.edu/MCA/Journal/pdfs/19-2-lave.pdf>.

Parts of this lecture are similar to the lecture given by Professor Lave at her home university (University of California, Berkeley) which can be viewed as a video at <http://www.uctv.tv/shows/Everyday-Life-and-Learning-23201>. Dr Lave's video lecture is quite "accessible", and for most purposes probably easier to understand than the Congress speech.

The next ISCAR Congress will be in Australia, in 2014.

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# Changing Practice

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This article is based on a keynote address given on the last day of the 2011 International Society for Culture & Activity Research (ISCAR) Congress in Rome. The first part reflects on the kind of work being presented at the conference. It was exciting and stimulating to learn about a rich range of new research in many different venues during the week. It also seemed important to reflect on what seemed to be missing, omissions that were common across the many themes and discussions. The second part of the article explores concrete examples of research, both in theory and in practice, which I hope may suggest to ISCAR participants some unusual possibilities for changing their own research practices between now and the next ISCAR congress in three years.

The genius of the International Society for Culture & Activity Research (ISCAR) may well lie in the long-term, theoretical/empirical engagement of its conference participants in crafting historical, material, and dialectical theory—theory that is concerned with the person (in practice, in the world), across generations, and across national and disciplinary boundaries. These efforts, at once theoretical and practical, are based on concerns about what is needed for engagement in a political struggle for a different, more inclusive, just, and habitable world.

Theory of activity, philosophy of praxis, and Marxist theory in its other various historical developments all embody a very broad vision of the production of social life. This is a vision not just of the mind, or of an historical institution, or of language as a thing in itself. Concentrating on the participation of these three in producing persons in practice historically implicates all of them in relation with one another. This mutual implication was reflected in ongoing efforts in Rome to broaden the scope of their social analysis across conventional conceptual and disciplinary boundaries, trying to bridge these boundaries, working to make connections that might change them, or at least to reassure participants that as theorist/practitioners we do share common theoretical and political concerns.

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What was missing? Briefly, historical specificity and political analysis. ISCAR stands for a cultural-historical approach to research, yet I heard many acknowledgments of the historical character of persons in practice in the world in terms that were merely fleeting and abstract.

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## REVOLUTIONIZING PRAXIS

To establish something of an agenda for considering the issues I have raised there is no better place to start than Marx's third Thesis on Feuerbach. I quote (subject to changes in the sexist language of the standard translation):

### ***"Thesis 3***

*"The materialist doctrine that people are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed people are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is people who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator her/himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice. (Marx, 1845)"*

An important methodological/theoretical inspiration for the project of revolutionizing practice that Marx says is necessary if we are to change both our circumstances and our activity is offered, I suggest, by Antonio Gramsci's writing. For those who are put off by a sort of vague popular assessment of Gramsci—probably either a weak Althusserian critique or an acceptance of Perry Anderson's (1976) old assessment, or Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) superficial reading, or just weak Gramscianism itself (Thomas, 2009), there are new resources at hand. Peter Thomas (2009) has produced an extraordinary historical-philosophical exposition of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, in his recent book *The Gramscian Moment*. This work draws on a new generation of compilation and translation of Gramsci's work, which offers the advantage of being able to move beyond thematic excerpts from the Notebooks (e.g., Forgacs, 1985; Hoare & Smith, 1971) to Gerrattana's (1975) complete transcription, and now an English translation of the entire Notebooks (Buttigieg, 1992, 1996, 2007).

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In his book, Peter Thomas underscores the importance of the Theses on Feuerbach, especially Thesis 3, for the development of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis. I can't think of a philosopher other than Gramsci who has put more effort into exploring the ramifications of "educating the educator," or who has located discussions of education in the context of changing practice, or who has given us as rich an account of what might be meant in Thesis 3 by "revolutionizing praxis." Gramsci's philosophy of praxis is a theory of learning and education. Philosophy of praxis aims to articulate commonly held sense from the stances of subaltern classes and is itself part of the struggle to give coherence to political work aimed at progressive change. For Gramsci, philosophy of praxis is also always political practice. Gramsci redefined politics, Thomas (2009) suggests, "not in terms of institutional power but as the reality of the transformation of human social relations and practices" (p. 97).

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Gramsci's political account of learning and education (and everything else) grew out of his analysis of the "absolute historicism" of philosophy of praxis. He pointed to the central engagement of state and private institutions of education in inculcating and defending dominant hegemonic relations of consent. That is not all that is going on in our complex contradictory world, of course. But because virtually all ISCAR participants do the work of these institutions, we also need to carry out the political analysis that our positions call for (cf. Rockwell's [2011] historical-political analysis of schooling). Gramsci articulated, with a rich language, the confusing and contradictory politics of our political locations and practices as academics, teachers, and researchers, and identified its core paradoxes and central questions. Are we traditional intellectuals? Are we democratic philosophers? Are we engaged in the philosophical work of organizing subaltern ideas for alternative hegemonic

ideologies/world views? How is it that we are, or might be, educators getting educated—what indeed does that mean? Gramsci had a lot to say about engaging in epochal struggles like those of our times—in fact, he might have said that they should be at the basis of our activity if we engage on his terms in philosophy of praxis. In our rapidly changing political times we need to be direct and serious about our own locations, activities, and the political effects of these on, and with, other people.

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...in the United States and in European countries, national, state, and private neoliberal forces are attacking the right to an education, rejecting the ideas that educated citizens are a public good and that research results are public goods (equating “the public good” with the commercialization of research findings). In direct and indirect ways neoliberal political and educational leaders are advancing scholarly and educational programs that will support and endorse profoundly conservative, plutocratic, and corporate goals. Tuition increases at public institutions of higher education have been so steep as to restrict this education to a small, wealthy elite. Steps are being taken at many universities to reduce fine arts, humanities, and the social sciences in favor of the “profit centers” of biology, engineering, physical sciences, and medicine. Within the social sciences, reorganization has given power and priority to positivist, conservative political scientists, sociologists, and economists, making ethnographic research difficult to defend and making it more precarious than ever to engage in politically challenging research on gender, race, and sexual orientation. A common technique (e.g., forced on Danish universities by their Ministry of Science [now the Ministry of Higher Education]) is to define narrowly (by majority vote of department faculty) those research journals that are deemed legitimate in assessments for promotion. The result is a narrow range of journals that completely or mostly excludes those that ISCAR participants read and for which they write. And I haven’t even mentioned the privatization of primary and secondary schooling, which is turning public schooling into a dismal residual institution.

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I have been arguing for years (along with other ISCAR participants) that our biographies and professions make it all too tempting to project academic, conventional theoretical assumptions about learning and knowing onto “the rest” of the world. It requires careful effort to resist theoretical and empirical research practices that treat “learning” as if it were

1. A concept of individual, internal mental exercise.
2. Only ever produced as a result of typical bureaucratic, institutional arrangements and trajectories of schooling.

3. Produced in particular through teaching, viewed as a prerequisite for learning.
4. Something that can only be studied from a third-person perspective, thus producing accounts of learning only as something done to others.

Surely these assumptions are derived, at least in part, from the conduct of our particularly knowledge-obsessed professional lives. I believe that addressing these assumptions critically, and engaging in research from an ethnographic point of view, can have a practical revolutionizing effect.

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Critical social psychologist Ole Dreier's theoretical/practical approach to what he calls "the conduct of everyday life" provides a particular example of such work, and anthropologist Tim Ingold's arguments about craftsmanship offer another. Both these researchers ground their work in relational, historical accounts of situated practice.

### **PERSONS IN MOTION: THE CONDUCT OF EVERYDAY LIFE**

Ole Dreier is a well-known member of ISCAR. He recently retired as Professor of Personality Psychology at Copenhagen University. Although not an anthropologist, he approaches research in ways closely related to ethnographic practice. In his book *Psychotherapy in Everyday Life*, Dreier (2008) laid out theoretically, and through his day-to-day inquiry, a deeply considered theoretical and empirical account of "the conduct of everyday life." He insisted on examining what it means for persons to engage in the changing day-to-day trajectories of their lives. He showed how these unfold as people participate, differently and partially, in their everyday lives. Dreier does for theories of situated practice, what J. J. Gibson (1986) did for perception: He insisted on setting persons, in practice, *in motion* across and throughout their daily contexts. This shift in assumptions about the fundamental conditions of possibility for participation in social life radically challenges our customary site-constrained research practices. Here are just a few illustrations:

Dreier's theory/practice contrasts sharply with common habits of limiting our research practice to one or two settings and looking at activity only within one setting at a time. He insisted that tracing persons' movements across the various contexts of their everyday lives is necessary for understanding how participation changes in changing practice. Furthermore, this leads him to explore how persons are not "the same" in different situations: Their identities are partial and plural. Dreier's approach also makes it clear that moving from one everyday life context to another is not the only way persons try to, and do, connect and affect activities in the different contexts in which they are participants. His perspective challenges educators' theories of "learning transfer," and it invites us to ask instead a question

with different political implications than the customary ones: “How is going to school a (relatively small) part of the conduct of everyday life?” Dreier’s work also makes us critically aware of the extent and the limitations of theorizing professional practices of all sorts from the location and perspective of only the professionals. He focused instead on the “first-person perspectives” of all concerned, including clients and other subalterns. His approach is rich in challenges that lead to fresh possibilities for revolutionizing research practice.

### **CRAFTSMANSHIP: SONG AND IMAGINATION**

Interestingly, anthropologist Tim Ingold also begins with J. J. Gibson’s theory of perception. Ingold’s ethnographic and theoretical work has been focused for many years on the interface between evolutionary biology and anthropology. He has argued that evolution is not an individual, genetically programmed natural evolutionary process but rather that change is immanent in developmental processes that extend across persons, practices, and lifetimes. This theory deserves careful attention for its relations with developmental psychology and beyond. Here I discuss only one of the ways that Ingold develops this broad theoretical stance. It is notable that he consistently rejects conventional polar distinctions in favor of relational conceptions (and with them conventional politics of social Darwinism in its many guises). His work exemplifies changing constraints that produce new research questions. Ingold (2000) has acknowledged that in recent years, “Neo-Darwinian biology, cognitive science and psycholinguistics have conspired to produce an extremely powerful approach to understanding the relations, in human evolution, between technology, language and intelligence” (p. 407). But against this focus Ingold proposed instead “a radically alternative claim: Suppose . . . we set ourselves the task of examining the relation, in human evolution, not between technology, language and intelligence, but between craftsmanship, song and imagination. The resulting account, I suspect would be very different” (p. 408). Very different indeed. Ingold’s approach surely challenges claims, ones with political roots in dominant hegemonic practices including our own. His work offers possibilities for educating ourselves by changing our circumstances and activities as Thesis 3 recommends.

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It will be evident that the work of Dreier and Ingold is not *only* about “learning.” To address the theory/practice of learning with respect to their work requires two things, then. First, we need to ask *how* learning *works* in the world *through* the conduct of everyday life (or dwelling, or skill) and, second, we need to ask how conducting everyday lives, or craftsmanship take the forms and relations they do *because* they are in part practices of learning.

## CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE: APPRENTICESHIP IN PRACTICE

To answer questions such as these requires detailed study of the processes of everyday living and doing. But if relational theory insists on the historical, processual character of human praxis, and on the inseparability of theory and practice, this poses a difficult methodological challenge.

This concern shaped the structure of my book *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice* (Lave, 2011). The idea was to look at theoretical practical relations of apprenticeship *in practice*. The title of the book sums up its several concerns. It is about the practice of apprenticeship among Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia in the 1970s, learning to make trousers and becoming master tailors. It also explores the process of ethnographic inquiry that unfolded over five years, furnishing an example for apprentice ethnographers of sustained and changing ethnographic work—itself also a kind of apprenticeship.

I chose to concentrate my ethnographic research on tailors' apprenticeship originally in opposition to roughly the five commonsense assumptions laid out above. These assumptions are often encapsulated in comparative binary characterizations of informal education as the devalued foil for Western schooling, styled "formal education."

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## CONCLUSIONS

I cannot think of a better agenda for each and every one of us, those who attended ISCAR and those who read *Mind, Culture, and Activity*—than setting out to educate the educator—that is to say, ourselves. But how? I began this article by suggesting that, as part of changing our activity in changing circumstances, we need to consider the most politically critical sites of political change, that is, we need to make familiar and recognizable our own everyday possibilities for "revolutionary praxis" and take them up in our research practice. I've pointed to some of the questions about learning that have grown out of recent ethnographic research, questions that challenge common sense, including academic common sense. These questions suggest some "next steps" in seeking understandings of persons in practice in the world, steps toward combining ISCAR's strength in keeping people in practice as the focus of research with a recognition that the conduct of research is an engagement in political practice.

But, in the face of our collective "silence" to which I referred earlier, the biggest step may well be that of developing new research that asks what the processes are by which persons are produced and produce themselves in historical and political

terms. Then we might become able to take up the same critical concerns with respect to our own circumstances, possibilities, and responsibilities, as researchers and teachers. Consider the modest proposal—made by Gosselain, by Ingold, and by me—that we take seriously the understanding of research as craft, and of both learning and changing identity as aspects of craftsmanship. Gosselain has recently articulated some of our basic commitments and present dilemmas as researchers in a call for Slow Science.

This is becoming a popular cause among academics in many fields, in many parts of the world. The Slow Science movement maintains that scientific inquiry is necessarily a slow, methodological, and thoughtful process, one that is directed not toward quick fixes but at the solution of deeper, more troubling, and yet less visible paradoxes and contradictions. Good craftsmanship takes time, and it takes time to become a skilled craftsman. Each of us has much to learn, but together we can help ourselves and one another to understand more adequately our own political situations and struggles and those of the people whose lives we study.

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